Result of the Bubonic Plague 1346-1350

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Life for women in the medieval era was less than ideal. Women had little autonomy, and only had two avenues to pursue, a life dedicated to God or to marriage. Yet, the station of women within society changed after the bubonic plague, due to the lack of people to perform necessary labor. This new found freedom that women were granted during the post-plague years did not rise from a permanent social shift in favor of women, but resulted from the void left by the millions that died. This paper suggests that the lives of women temporarily improved after the plague, but this did not bring about a permanent change for women's station within society. The plague resulted in temporary changes to cope with the labor shortage. However it did not permanently change the roles and standing of Late Medieval women. Once Europe began to recover its population women were forced back into a lower station in society.

Women had few avenues to pursue in early Medieval society. If a woman did not want to dedicate her life to the church than her only other viable option was marriage. During this period many women had limited control of their marriage, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, evidence of this lies within cases of ravishment and divorce before the plague. In the case of Emma Herevay, who ran away from her husband in 1336 due to domestic abuse was threatened to return. She was threatened with excommunication from

the church if she failed to return to his home.[82] This threat would have loomed large on the conscience of any Medieval Catholic. The intimidation of excommunication was used especially to intimidate wives to return to their husbands, even though many left for their own safety. In Medieval marriages a certain level of violence was to be expected.

Any husband was able to control "his wife's financial assets and public behavior, but also freely enforced his will through physical violence.[83]" This was the reality for many women across Europe; there was little they could do to escape their troubled marriages. There were few choices for women in this period; economic stability remained with their husbands as well as the favor of the church. Women had little legal power within the courts due to the fact that husband that lorded over them represented the interests of the entire household in court, which included his wife[84]. At this time women did win annulments, nevertheless they were infrequent and there was no way to enforce granted alimony payments, leaving women to be a burden on their families or remain in unhappy marriages. Prior to the plague women had few economic routes to pursue if they were granted a separation from their husband, forcing many to remain in unhealthy marriages.

Despite the mobility that the bubonic plague offered its survivors it did not fully extended to women. Evidence of this lies in the annulment and separation cases after the plague; women were treated similarly to pre-plague women. In years after the Bubonic plague women were continually bullied by the state and pulpit to return to their husbands. The case of Agnes Wormes demonstrated how wives had little judicial power over their husbands. While formalizing a separation from her husband, Ralph Irwyn, he presented counter charges to ensure that he would not lose any of the capital that she had brought to

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[82] Sara Butler, "Runaway Wives: Husband Desertion in Medieval England" Journal of Social History :Winter 2006 337-359 pg. 340

[83] Judith M. Bennett, Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague: Oxford 1987 p. 103

[84] Bennett pg. 28

their marriage[85], leaving her vulnerable to economic instability. For Wormes to keep her dowry after spending an extended time married was unlikely, as was receiving alimony. Other women who tried to leave unhealthy marriages were threatened by the church within their very community if they did not return to their husband. In 1412 Katherine wife of John ate Mulle, who left her husband returned only upon the threat of a heavy fine and six public beatings, the sentence was passed down by the Dean of Salisbury Cathedral[86]. Even after the plague, when women were contributing to society to take the place of their dead male counter parts women were still not seen as equals within the eyes of the law or the church. The legal status of women after the plague did not change in the eyes of church making it difficult to cement a permanent social change when women were continuously treated as inferiors. Even after the plague men brought forth more divorce proceedings than women[87], if there had been an actual lasting shift in the power of women, than more women would have left unhealthy marriages to pursue their own independent ambitions. At the end of the fifteenth century, when European social roles were beginning to shift back to those in prior to the plague women were unable to support themselves without the aid of a man making it difficult for women to maintain independence, while evading squalor. The fact that wives remained significantly inferior in law made it unlikely that women would be able to achieve a lasting independence within society.

Women had little control over their own lives in the prior to the plague. Few testaments of women's lives survive from the early medieval era; however, *A Handbook for William* by Dhuoda, addressed to her son William, remains intact. Her writing exposes the extreme lack of control that even a noble women had over their own lives prior to the plague. They were overwhelmed by constant feelings of helplessness over

[85] Butler, pg. 339-40
[86] Butler, pg. 344
[87] Butler, pg. 337

their own destiny. This feeling can be seen in Dhuoda's understand of her own salvation, "I am unsure how," she writes "on the basis of my merits, I may be able to be set free at the end. Why? Because I have sinned in thought and in speech.[88]" The thought that she was incapable through her own actions, to save her own soul, shows the limited control a pious wife and mother perceived to have. That she felt the need to appeal to her son to aid in the salvation of her soul demonstrated the lack of power that women actually had. Dhuoda had little choice in the role that she played in her own life. With her husband constantly at war she had no choice but to manage their lands and protect them from danger[89]. Esteemed gender historian, Joan Kelly asserts that this was not unusual for noblewomen at the time, many were taught to" hunt and use arms so they could be of use when their husbands went to war.[90]" These women also received an education on religious text, but it was to be used to instill these values within their children. Noble women that were in a similar station in life could not suddenly choose to pursue a religious life instead of become betrothed. Women within the noble classes prior to the plague had little choice but to marry, protect their husbands' property while he gallivanted across Europe, to bear moral Christian children that would continue to lead faith driven lives. There was little flexibility from being that model of a noble wife prior to the plague.

Prior to the plague the culture that surrounded wifehood could be seen in the popular culture of the period. Beowulf, one of the renowned tales of the Medieval period, would have found an audience across England. In the tale there is the depiction of the conduct of the ideal wife through Queen Wealhtheow of the Danes. Wealhtheow infrequently appears in the tale, but is seen during the banquet scenes. The first time

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[88] Dhouda, A Handbook for William: A Carolingian Woman's Counsel for Her Son, trans. Carol Neel (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America Press: 1991) pg. 99

[89] Dhouda, x

[90] Joan Kelly, Women, History, and Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1984) pg. 116

Wealhteow appears is in the banquet where the warriors are celebrating with Beowulf. At this juncture her main role was to provide for warriors, which included drink, upon serving Beowulf, "He took then the cup, a man violent in war, at Wealhtheow's hand and framed his utterance, eager for the conflict.[91]" Demonstrating that her role within society was servitude, even to a man that was not of noble birth. It was clear that this was to show that warriors held a higher status than the Queen, the highest ranking women within Danish society. Serving as a tool for all women in pre plague England that servitude was a part of womanhood. As host Wealhtheow's never spoke against the warriors and when she spoke did so to encourage, "Take pride in this jewel, have joy of this mantle drawn from out treasuries, most dear Beowulf! May fortune come with them and may you flourish in your youth![92]" This testament by Wealhtheow is the extent of her input within the tale. The tale illustrated to the women who heard it that their station within society was servitude. That even the highest woman within society could not avoid the fate that was attached to their gender. The Queen's demeanor demonstrated that women had to function within the strict roles that society allotted them, that no women, that not even the Queen had autonomy within her own household.

Women gained a level of economic independence during the years after the bubonic plague in response to the labor shortage that it created. This gave women an amount of autonomy over their own lives, which was not seen during previous years, yet, it was not permanent. It was a fleeting occurrence and the need for women's equality did not fully permeated European culture. Chaucer's Canterbury tales demonstrated that women had not achieved a lasting status as independent individuals, because the women within these tales do not exhibit any of the autonomy that they had during the post plague years. For instance, the tale of the Miller surrounds the conquest of a young married

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[91] Beowulf trans. Michael Alexander (London: Penguin Press: 2001) Pg. 25
[92] Alexander, pg. 45

woman, Alison. Alison's appearance is described in detail as having a slim and sleek body, with a "mouth [that] was as sweet as bragget or mead, Or a hoard of apples laid in hay or weed, Skittish she was as is a pretty colt.[93]"The Miller fails to give his audience an understanding of her personality, leading to the interpretation that it did not actually matter who she was. Throughout the tale she was never seen performing any task that defined her character outside of her physical function as a woman. By the end of the tale Alison remains a character without a personality; her entire purpose was to serve the sexual fantasies and desires of the men that were encountered. The encroachment on to women's safety by men continued after the plague and was not seen as a serious crime unless it was against a married or noble woman. Knights had the power and authority to rape peasant women that they came across[94], which was demonstrated in the tale the Wife of Bath. In that tale a rapist was saved from death by the merciful Queen to complete a quest for her[95]. While the Queen did exhibit power that earlier Anglo-Saxon Queen Wealhtheow did not appear to have, it was against the rights of another woman. This shows that women had no concrete protection against even the vilest of offenses. The women in Chaucer's Canterbury tales further demonstrate that women had not cemented a permanent change within European culture. Their newly granted autonomy was not a result of a zeitgeist, but a demand for labor. Had there been a universal change within society towards women's roles, it would have permeated into the cultural outlets. However, that a stronger female character was not included foreshadows the decline of women's autonomy once the European population recovered.

In the post-plague century, institutions were created to fill the void left by those killed in the plague. After the plague guilds that allowed women to work were created to fill the labor void created by the plague. This gave the women who worked in the guilds a

[93] Geoffrey Chaucer Selected Canterbury Tales (Dover. 89
[94] Kelly, pg. 22
[95] Chaucer, pg.120

public way to participate in society. Interestingly enough, in the early fifteenth century the parish guilds were not divided by gender, leaving men and women to participate together. Even though women served amongst men they established a level of independence at these guilds that few had experienced before, for instance, the parish guilds organized themselves, which included the women advocating for their own desires and ideas[96]. Prior to the plague women were barred from participating in any meaningful capacity within the guild framework, yet, the dire need to rebuild Europe after the plague made it so that women were able to work side by side with men.

As the horrors of the plague crept into the pass and life began to ease the independence that women had gained during the immediate years after the plague began to fall by the wayside. This was because the changes were merely in place to manage the chaos that the plague had left Europe in. Parish guilds that included women continued throughout the fifteenth century, but they did not maintain their earlier demeanor. Near the end of the fifteenth century women were only permitted to organize in a way "that ultimately affirmed their secondary status within the parish[97]." As the population recovered women were only permitted to hold meager service positions, such as the collection and selling of eggs, dairy, and were only able to serve in diminutive ways in guild labor work as pinners and spinners[98]. Once the population of Europe began to recover women were "forced increasingly into marginal and poorly paid occupations, and into positions of dependency[99]" making it impossible to maintain their former autonomy, forcing women to accept their former roles and restraints within society. Guilds that included women continued into the early Renaissance, but their power waned causing

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[96] Katherine L. French *Maidens' Lights and Wives' Stories: Women's Parish Guilds in Late Medieval England* "The Sixteenth Century Journal' Vol. 29 No. 2 399-425. Pg. 401
[97] French, Pg. 402
[98] P.J.P. Goldberg *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire 1300-1500* (New York: Oxford Press, 1992) pg. 7
[99] Goldberg, pg. 337

many to be disbanded[100]. Women's guilds became a rarity throughout the rest of European history. Demonstrating that the social changed which occurred in the aftermath of the plague years occurred because of the need to fill labor shortages, not a vast overarching change in European social structure.

A result of the plague was that women could avoid marriage. Previously, women had little choice whether they were betrothed. The opening of the economy allowed women to avoid marriage and shape womanhood to suit their own personal needs Esteemed Medieval historian Goldberg assessed that after the bubonic plague women "were not forced back into positions of dependency within marriage. This can be seen in the decline of population after the Black Death. Women had more independence and autonomy, with the sheer lack of people available they found work that provided them with a livable wage[101]." This allowed women to pursue womanhood in a uniquely individual way. At this time women were taking on various tasks that had been male dominated, while maintaining a family, demonstrating that for them womanhood was far more complex than serving as a wife and mother. In the parish guilds many women that served maintained their roles as wives and mothers, but utilized their own ingenuity to ensure the success of their guild, in Chagford, Devon when women took over the finances they instilled their own "financial strategies took advantage of women's domination of brewing, and as a result, the guild's finances flourished.[102]" Demonstrating that women in this period were far more complex than any cultural outlet had shown. These humble women became more successful than their male equals and were pious in their constant activity to maintain their church.

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[100] Sheilagh Ogilivie "How Does Social Capital Affect Women? Guilds and Communities in Early Modern Germany" The American Historical Review, Vol. 9 No.2. pg.325
[101] Goldberg, Pg. 7
[102] French, pg. 407

Women were not given a new station within the laws of Medieval Europe and were instead after the boom of social mobility after the plague the church began to aggressively seek out and destroy the advantages that women had gained. This can be seen in the dramatic increase in court cases brought against women in the late fifteenth century. At times women who "crossed over the gender barrier and exhibited…masculine characteristics soon found herself labeled a scold, or worse a petty traitor.[103]" Once the church and state began to seek out these women that had gained a level of independence they made it so it was impossible for them to exist within their community. Women had little choice but to assuage their new found power and resume the role society once had for them. These laws did not take place in a vacuum, the years of war and plague had permitted the social order to skew towards a morality that the church had not condoned[104]. In acting the church and state governments were trying to end their own vulnerability, which was due to the lack of faith that people in their institutions because of the wrath that God had sent down upon them in the form of wars and plague. This was the way the Church was reasserting their moral authority after the plague years when doubt in their moral authority waned on the minds of European Catholics.

The plague offered women a momentary chance to obtain an autonomy that was at the time was only experienced by men. Women pursued creative endeavors that can still be seen by modern historians. The changes for women that occurred during the immediate post plague years were directly tied to societies need to fill labor positions vacated by the millions that died in the plague. Since the change for the status of women did not permeate the entirety literature, law and labor it became a fleeting occurrence. Once Europe began to recover from the devastation of the plague the labor that women provided was no longer needed and they resumed their lesser roles of pre-plague society.

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[103] Sara M. Butler *The Language of Abuse: Marital Violence in Late Medieval England* (New York: Brill: 2007) pg. 259
[104] Butler, pg. 253